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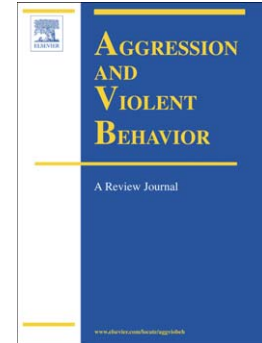
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## Examining the Role of Faith Community Groups with Sexual Offenders: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of faith-based communities and activities in helping those convicted of sexual offending, desist from crime and reintegrate back into their communities. It was found that much of the current research is limited to non-offending juvenile populations. Where research has been carried out on adult offenders, these tend to be custodial cases and exclude those convicted of sexual offending. The role of religious and spiritual groups in helping people convicted of sexual offending to desist from crime, while reintegrating into the community is, therefore, unknown. A number of parallels between the factors needed to promote desistance from sexual offending and the conditions encountered when engaged with a faith community are outlined. We would note that a religious and spiritual environment can: promote motivation to change, provide access to pro-social peers, offer moral guidance, provide a support network, and help bring meaning into people's lives. The potential for people to use faith-based communities or organizations to facilitate offending, are also considered. Finally, implications for probation work and future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** sexual offenders, rehabilitation, desistance, faith groups

## 1. Introduction

The barriers faced by those convicted of sexual offending when attempting to reintegrate back into the community are great. Barriers such as; unstable housing (Levenson & Hern, 2007), unemployment (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007), being displaced from the family unit (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), being isolated from any community support (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008), feeling stressed (Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2009), afraid and shameful (Robbers, 2009) impede the likelihood of successful rehabilitation (Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006) and increase the risk of falling back to maladaptive coping strategies (Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2009). This period of re-entry is, therefore, an important one, especially given that successful re-entry has been found to decrease the likelihood of recidivism (Göbbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012).

One important part of the process used to manage people convicted of sexual offending, is the development and implementation of rehabilitation or re-entry plans (Göbbels, Willis, & Ward, 2014); where criminal-justice practitioners can play a critical role to assist people during this process of re-entry. However, knowledge of the development and implementation of effective plans is limited. We do know that ineffective rehabilitation plans, neglect to match identified risks with appropriate strategies (Bosker, Witteman, & Hermanns, 2013), and, in the main, rely on control measures over supportive strategies (Kewley, Beech, Harkins, & Bonsall, in press). Indeed, poor rehabilitation planning results in negative experiences for the individual (Willis & Johnston, 2012) and can also increase recidivism (Willis & Grace, 2008, 2009). On the other hand, effective plans include opportunities for individuals to engage in community support (Duwe, 2012), encourage individuals to secure positive social support, and develop pro-social networks (Göbbels et al., 2014).

Even so, following court sanctions, those convicted of sexual offending, are often unable to identify with strong pro-social communities, who can support them in their journey

returning from a life of crime. Instead, they are isolated and excluded from their own communities (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009) making reentry planning a challenge. There is, one group whose role may have an important part in the reintegration process for some offenders; faith communities. Universal to all communities, religious and spiritual groups provide an interesting avenue worthy of further exploration.

The role and meaning of religious and spiritual communities to individuals is therefore, an intriguing one. Especially given that two of the primary goods sought by all humans include that of community and spirituality (Ward & Stewart, 2003). All faiths, in essence, are person-centric, and forgiveness, love, tolerance, and compassion are some of the virtues most faith communities strive to achieve. Indeed, for this reason many religious groups have prioritized their agenda to work with the most disadvantaged, and the marginalized within our society.

Several faith groups have operated alongside the criminal-justice system for many years, informally, and more recently as partner agencies. Indeed, with almost three-quarters of the population in England and Wales identifying themselves as having a specific religion (*Religion in England and Wales 2011, 2012*), a third of all prisoners engaging in religious worship (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002), and on release from prison, three-quarters of those convicted of a sexual offense are involved with the church (Robbers, 2009). Therefore, it appears reasonable to expect faith communities, to play a role, in the re-entry strategies of such offending populations. However, in a recent study of 217 sexual offenders' rehabilitation plans (and counter to expectations), only one rehabilitation plan of the 217 noted the use of a faith-based group as a support of offenders' reintegration (Kewley et al., in press).

This review is set out in the following way. First, we review the current faith and criminology literature by presenting the findings of our systematic review. Following this, we

present an observation that the factors required to foster the process of desistance, parallel the aims of many faith communities. We suggest that, for those convicted of sexual offending who wish to reform, and for whom religion is genuinely important, a religious or spiritual environment might operate in two meaningful ways; first, as a catalyst to change; and second, as a maintenance mechanism for the desistance process. To develop this proposal we draw on a number of interesting desistance theories including: Identity Theory (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), Cognitive Transformation Theory (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001), Integrative Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending (ITDSO) (Göbbels et al., 2012) and the virtues and values which support the desistance process (McNeill & Farrall, 2013). We also draw on Ward and Beech's (2006) Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (ITSO), and the prevention work of Smallbone, Marshall, and Wortley (2013), to present how situational factors, such as a faith community can be vulnerable to exploitation, or act as an unexpected opportunity where possible victims and opportunities are readily and easily available. First, we provide a brief summary of what the existing literature tells us, of the role of faith communities, when assisting those convicted of sexual offending to rehabilitate back into the community.

## **2. What the literature currently tells us about faith and adults convicted of sexual offending**

The literature examining the relationship between faith and crime is currently under-developed (Duwe & Johnson, 2013). However, of the literature available, studies in the main show how faith or engaging in religious activity reduces criminal or deviant behavior. Overwhelmingly, studies of the effects of religion and crime examine adolescent populations; few studies examine adult offending populations, and fewer still sexual offending populations. This disproportion of adult offender studies, within the literature, is perhaps best

demonstrated by considering Johnson's (2011) systematic review, and Baier and Wright's (2001) earlier meta-analysis.

Johnson's (2011) review of 272 faith and crime studies, found, in 90% of the studies, support for his argument that *More God* means *Less Crime*. The studies were predominantly based within the United States, and ranged from 1944 to 2010. Of the 272 studies, 86% (n=235) analyzed the effects of religion on the delinquent behavior of children, teenagers or college or high-school students. A further 3% (n=9) considered the effects on mothers or families of delinquent children, and 1% (n=5) considered the effects or perceptions on whole geographic areas through national survey or police localities. In this review, only 10% (n=28) examined adult offender populations, such as; drug users, violent offenders, domestic abusers, tax evaders, or those engaging in general disruptive behaviors in prisons. None of the studies, specifically, examined the effects of faith or religion on populations convicted of sexual offending.

It was found that in Baier and Wright's (2001) meta-analysis of 60 studies, dating from 1969 to 1998, religion acted as a barrier to crime. Seventy-three percent (n=44) of the papers in the meta-analysis consisted of studies on children, students, or teenagers; one paper was a discussion paper; one looked at the effects on the family unit; the remaining 12% (n=7) of studies used adult populations. However, these were general adult populations, and not all participants had engaged in criminal acts, but rather, anti-social behaviors such as alcohol misuse. Baier and Wright's meta-analysis also tells us little of the effects of religion on adult offending populations.

Although, both Johnson (2011) and Baier and Wright's (2001) findings show religion as having an inverse relationship with crime, their conclusions are drawn in the main from adolescent populations. This is an important area in terms of understanding the issues of early onset and development of crime; however, it does not advance our understanding of the



relationship between religion and adult offending/rehabilitating populations. Likewise, these large reviews tell us nothing of the effects on the population of those convicted of sexual crimes.

### **3. Systematic review findings**

In an effort to address this gap, we completed a systematic review. Given that both Johnson (2011) and Baier and Wright (2001), covered the literature up to the year 2000, the systematic review criterion was limited to electronic records published between January, 2000 and January, 2014. Key terms included “faith” or “religion” and “offender” or “crime” which featured in the title, abstract or key words. 600 records were retrieved from the following electronic databases: ProQuest, SwetsWise, Wiley Online, Sage Journals, Google Scholar, and the first authors (SK) own reference library. When applying the criteria (detailed in Appendix 1), 21 studies remained, see Table 1. Discussion of these studies follows.

Table 1 about here

#### **3.1. Relationship between religion and desistance from crime**

Of the 21 studies reviewed, only Eshuys and Smallbone (2006) purposefully sampled a cohort of individuals with histories of sexual convictions. Six studies included a range of participants with varying criminal histories, included in these, were small numbers of participants with a history of sexual offending. It is noted that offense type in these studies was of relevance to the study in relation to the demographic profile of the sample, or for matching with a control group. The remaining 14 studies either listed the offense types of their sample, in which sexual offenses were not included, or did not include any descriptor of offense type. This review found support for the notion that religious involvement has an inverse effect on crime and delinquency. We found that in 76% (n=16) of the studies we

sampled, where religious engagement had occurred, participants experienced a beneficial effect.

The reported beneficial effects of religious engagement include: (a) reduced recidivism, reduced use of substances, and assisting the desistance process (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Bakken, Gunter, & Visher, 2014; Duwe & King, 2013; Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008; Jensen & Gibbons, 2002); (b) acting as an emotional comforter improving psychological outcomes, such as a reduction in negative emotions including anger, depression, anxiety, and stress (Kerley, Matthews, & Schulz, 2005b; Mela, Marcoux, Baetz, Griffin, Angelski, & Deqiang, 2008; Schroeder & Frana, 2009); (c) improving pro-social peer association, strengthening social bonds and social opportunities (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken, & Dammer, 2000; Giordano et al., 2008; Kerley & Copes, 2009); (d) assisting individuals form positive identities giving a sense of purpose, meaning and a new way of life (Clear et al., 2000; Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006); (e) reducing anti-social behaviors while in prison, such as fighting and arguing with other inmates, breaking prison rules (Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury, & Dabney, 2011; Kerley, Matthews, & Blanchard, 2005a; Kerley et al., 2005b; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002); and (f) enabling inmates to better cope with life in prison (Kerley & Copes, 2009; Maruna et al., 2006). Not all studies found an encouraging relationship between religion and crime; we consider these now.

### **3.2. No relationship/mixed relationship between religion and crime**

Johnson's (2004) study was the only one, in this review, to find no association between crime and faith. Of the group that did engage in the faith intervention program in prison, there was an initial improvement in recidivism rates, for those who engaged in more Bible studies, but over a longer period of measurement, the difference was negligible.

Two studies reported mixed results and two with harmful outcomes. Pezzella and Vlahos (2014), considered the association between religious practice and health and risky health behaviors. They found no association between religion and the general health of the sample, but did find an inverse relationship between religion and risky behaviors such as substance abuse, extramarital, and unprotected sex practices. Allen, Phillips, Roff, Cavanaugh, and Day (2008), also found mixed results in their study of older inmates and their mental health experiences. Where inmates engaged in daily spiritual activities, they experienced less depression and reduced feelings of or a desire to hasten the end of life. However, greater religious coping and feeling abandoned by God were also associated with greater experiences of depression. Indeed, not only were there studies, which found no association between, religion and crime, two found a negative one relationship. These are considered here.

### **3.3. A harmful relationship between religion and crime**

There were two studies, which found the association between faith and crime to be a harmful one. In Topalli, Brezina, and Bernhardt's (2013) study, which examined street criminals, they found that those who held strong beliefs about God, punishment and the afterlife, used their beliefs not only to justify their offending behavior, but, as a motivation to do God's work. The authors make the important point that; their findings do not reveal an association with religion and crime *per se*, rather that participants engage in an inadequate or purposeful misinterpretation of religious scriptures, which in turn, allows the individual to engage in criminal deviancy. This process, it is reported, serves to alleviate and neutralize strong religious beliefs of death and the afterlife.

Eshuys and Smallbone's (2006) study of 111 prisoners incarcerated for sexual offenses found religion to be positively related to sexual offending. This study analyzed self-report data of participants' lifetime experiences with religion. They categorized participants'

experiences into four groups: (a) 'Atheists', who had low religious experiences both as a child and an adult, (b) 'Stayers', who had high religious experiences as a child and an adult, (c) 'Drop-Outs', who had high religious experiences as a child but not as an adult, and (d) 'Converts', who had low religious experiences as a child and high as an adult. These categories were then compared with the participants' criminogenic profile, including age, number of victims and gender and previous sexual and non-sexual offenses.

They found that stayers, those who had very strong religious beliefs and continued affiliation into adulthood ( $n=23$ ), tended to have much younger and a greater number of victims, and had committed many more offenses when compared to the remaining participants' in the sample (Eshuys & Smallbone, 2006). The largest group in this study was the atheists ( $n=45$ ) who were found to fit a more general offending profile. They were the youngest in the sample and had the fewest number of recorded sexual offenses. Victims of their sexual crimes were also much older. As too were the converts; however, this group had the most number of recorded non-sexual offenses, indicating a prolonged generalized offending history. The final group; the drop-outs, were found to be more likely to have been convicted of a previous sexual offense, but not as many as the participants who had maintained religious activity into adulthood.

These findings have significance for this review, particularly as this is the only study, to our knowledge, which specifically explores the relationship between religious affiliation and a population of people convicted of sexual offending. The study appears to tell us that those offenders who experienced religion over their lifetime while holding "hell-fire" beliefs (i.e., belief in life after death, supernatural eternal punishment, sinner goes to eternal hell and damnation, etc.), saw their faith in an extreme and unforgiving way. This group, it appears, is likely to have lived by dominant patriarchal values; living with an inflexible interpretation of the scriptures. Such belief systems are likely to have included pro-offending attitudes, such

as, beliefs about entitlement, seeing children as sexual beings and assuming women always want sex (Craissati & Beech, 2003). However, these findings are in relation to participant's experiences of faith, linked to offending, rather than linked to rehabilitation. They do, nevertheless, have real value in helping us to understand which people may or may not benefit from being encouraged to participate in religious or spiritual communities.

In summary, this current systematic review finds overwhelming evidence that religious affiliation and practice brings beneficial outcomes for those incarcerated for their crimes and while living in the community. However, with the exception of one study, the findings do not include specific insight into the effects of religion on a population convicted of sexual offending. We will now examine, the effects of religion and spirituality for those rehabilitating from sexual offending.

#### **4. Proposed value of a faith environment in supporting the desistance process**

Given the current gap in the literature, we would note that involvement with religion or spirituality might offer an appropriate environment to assist those convicted of sexual offending to reintegrate back into the community. We would note that a faith environment might act both as a catalyst to change and/or as a mechanism for maintaining change.

Desistance occurs over a period of time and involves psychological, social, and environmental mechanisms (Göbbels et al., 2012). The potential role of an environmental mechanism, such as a faith community, might be an important one; as such environments allow interplay of both psychological and social mechanisms. That said, our propositions must be contextualized within formal risk management processes. We argue that in order to reintegrate those convicted of sexual offending, and help prevent further reoffending, reintegration should only ever occur in conjunction with robust risk assessment and case management, carried out by qualified and supported specialist practitioners.

The value of religion and spirituality is not a new proposition for supporting the desistance process; Giordano et al. (2002) claimed that a religious community is one of the most powerful ‘hooks for change’ (a catalyst for cognitive transformation required for long term behavioral change). Even so, research into this phenomenon, particularly for those convicted of sexual offending is limited. Indeed, there are concerns, that situations such as faith environments, can be strong influences on criminal behavior, and such situations can provide both the opportunity and access to potential victims (Smallbone et al., 2013). We discuss these concerns below, but first we begin at the initial phase in the desistance process, or decisive moment, as detailed by Göbbels et al. (2012) in their Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending.

#### **4.1. The primary phase of desistance**

According to Maruna (2001), the desistance process occurs in two distinct phases: A primary phase where crime stops, and a secondary phase, where the individual transforms identity and roles, demarking a clear change in the self. This first phase requires certain conditions, such as a ‘hook’ or a trigger to promote a person’s interest in change (Giordano et al., 2008). These conditions are often stimulated when an individual faces a life changing event, they begin to question who they are, or what they have done, and they often spend time reflecting and self-evaluating (Göbbels et al., 2012). Indeed, the prison environment is one place where these three conditions are most likely to occur. Prison is perhaps one of the most hostile and harsh places for those convicted of sexual offending to exist (Schwaebe, 2005). Such individuals, often face segregation from the general prison population, often for their own safety (Priestley, 1980). People from the prison faith community, such as chaplains, or prison volunteers, may be the first people within the prison with whom, prisoners feel safe. Indeed, initial reasons for attending religious groups are not always for spiritual or personal change; engagement may be to feel safe, to mix with others outside of prison and gain material

comforts (Clear et al., 2000). Such interactions provide small luxuries not readily available in prison, such as cakes and biscuits, along with comfort, hope and direction to a new way of life. Access to a religious group or spiritual belief system might therefore, provide a ‘hook’ to the first phase of the desistance process. However, in isolation this is inadequate.

The second phase of the process requires a more substantial and meaningful change. It is one that requires both internal transformation and the external support from others. We consider how a faith or spiritual community might reinforce this second phase, by first examining the period of re-entry.

#### **4.2. Supporting re-entry**

Perhaps the most difficult phase of the desistance process for those convicted of sexual offending is the re-entry phase (Göbbels et al., 2012). The public perception of ‘sexual offenders’ is one of risk and dangerousness; they are perceived as untreatable individuals, incapable of change (Payne, Tewksbury, & Mustaine, 2010). In addition, criminal justice policy and practice characterize people convicted of sexual crime, in terms of risk, danger, and persistence. Because the primary method to deal with those convicted of sexual offenses is to manage, treat, and punish (McNeill, 2004), utilizing support from those outside of the criminal justice circuit, is a practicable option.

Although support from friends and family, who do not hold true stigmatized labels can be invaluable, often those convicted of sexual offending are socially isolated and separated from family following court sanctions (Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005). Locating others within the community who are willing and skilled to work with such stigmatized individuals is a challenge. Skills to support people moving through a behavioral change process requires: empathy, collaboration, (Durnescu, 2012) a tolerance for the inevitable lapses likely to be experienced when making changes (Prochaska & Diclemente, 1983); and a belief that people can change (Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004).

Given that faith communities champion humane kinship through altruistic activities (Kotze, 2013), and promote virtues such as respect, care, compassion and forgiveness, such association would foster and support the de-labeling process required to maintain desistance. Indeed, many faith-based organizations dedicate their work to support and reintegrate people back into the community, and are supported by committed volunteers (Phillips, Whitehead, Groombridge, & Bonham, 2011). In fact, a provision outside of a persons disconnected family, and distinct from formal criminal-justice agencies, may not only stimulate the desistance process, but also offer a non-threatening support network (Clear et al., 2000). Religious and spiritual communities could, therefore, provide access to people, who are able to dismiss the stigmatized label associated with 'sexual offending' and thereby facilitate a process of change (Maruna et al., 2006) along with introducing the individual to wider social opportunities and networks.

#### **4.3. Developing new networks**

The second phase in the process of desistance requires people to seek out new networks and to develop new or existing pro-social relationships. Promoting association within a faith community, would enable people to distance themselves from anti-social associations and interact and network with pro-social others (Kerley & Copes, 2009). Such a model has been successfully integrated into many communities across the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. For example, Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) work specifically, in this way, with those who have committed sexual offenses (Hanvey, Wilson, & Philpot, 2011). COSA was originally founded by a Christian Minister; he gathered support within his local community to work with people at high risk of sexual recidivism, who were released from custody without statutory restraint or support. Current COSA volunteers are drawn from a wider community, and faith is not a dominant feature, although the values of the original circle remain.



Religious and spiritual communities informally replicate this model. Not only does engagement with a faith community provide spiritual connection for those seeking this, but it can provide alternative pro-social networks otherwise absent from those previously engaged with crime (Giordano et al., 2008). While the many activities within religious and spiritual groups, center on worship or practice, many social activities also take place, allowing for interaction and development of new networks and opportunities. There are likely to be varying degrees, of acceptance and tolerance, even within faith communities. However because most faith communities promote inclusivity and unity, it is expected that such groups might go some way to mitigate the risk of exclusion and instead increase networking opportunities.

#### **4.4. Redemption**

In order for individuals to reconnect with the true self (Giordano et al., 2008), rationalize old behaviors (Maruna, 2001), or re-invent a whole new identity (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), there exists the need for redemption (Maruna, 2009). Redemption is, however, a reciprocal process requiring two willing parties. For those wishing to change from a position of deviancy to one of good moral standing, a ‘moral mediator’ between offender and community is required (McNeill & Farrall, 2013). Religious and spiritual communities can provide this bridge between prison or court sanctions and the community. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, many faith-based organizations, such as, the Community Chaplaincy, Langley House Trust and St George’s Crypt already provide this service, with volunteers meeting people while still in prison and assisting them, by, mediating reintegration barriers such as housing, employment and providing a contact for release (CLINKS, 2014).

This moral mediation can act as a platform to re-inventing a new identity through exposure to new ways of thinking and viewing the world. Many faiths encourage the re-invention of self-narratives, assisting people to deal with their past regressions, by

acknowledging their guilt and moving forward to a new life rather than being paralyzed by feelings of shame (Clear et al., 2000), here, people can begin to develop narratives which define themselves as ‘non-offenders’ (Göbbels et al., 2012). This also allows people the opportunity to give back to society, to advocate on the behalf of others and truly make amends for their actions.

#### **4.5. Reparation**

Those in the final maintenance stage of desistance tend to have a desire to bring meaning to their life (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010) along with the need to give back to others (Maruna, 2001). Faith communities are notoriously driven to help and support the communities they serve. While many religious and spiritual organizations’ missions might be to proselytize none-believers, this is not their sole aim. Many endeavor to reach out and aid the most marginalized of society. Indeed, where a sense of purpose and duty is experienced, for those convicted of crime, this tends to be gained by those active in the church (Clear et al., 2000). The considerable charitable energies employed by faith communities might therefore, serve as a pathway for reforming offenders in which they can begin to meet their own needs to give back to society. This process is mutually rewarding, as others in need are supported and encouraged, and the giver self-rewards for assisting others (Kerley et al., 2011).

#### **5. The potential for abuse within a faith environment**

The relationship between being involved with a religious and spiritual community and the facilitation of the process of desistance, for those convicted of sexual offending, is important. Not only might faith communities provide the initial incentive required for someone to enter the first phase of the process of desisting from crime; but, in an environment which offers peer support, care, belief in change and opportunities to enhance social networks, change could be maintained over a substantial period of time. However, we are mindful that

situations, such as religious or spiritual environments, can also provide opportunities for sexually abusive behaviors (Smallbone et al., 2013); this must be monitored, and is discussed here briefly.

The environment in which a person lives or works can be a cause for those with pre-existing vulnerabilities to sexually offend (Ward & Beech, 2006). A faith environment is one vulnerable to such abuse. In the first instance, a religious or spiritual environment provides an opportunity to those people, already predisposed to sexual offending. Such a person might seek out and target a faith environment, or should they find themselves in a faith community, act impulsively on opportunities (Smallbone et al., 2013).

In addition, there are some people for whom the environment itself acts as an influence. Smallbone, Marshall, and Wortley (2013), divide these sexual offenders into three categories. First, the ‘committed’ sexual offender will actively seek out and manipulate situations in which to offend. He is more likely to have quite a criminalized history and be easily tempted by opportunity. The second type is the ‘opportunistic’ sexual offender, who does not create opportunities, but rather, takes advantage of them as they arise. He is likely to have a low-level criminal history and appears to function naturally, holding down a job, is married, etc. The final type is the ‘situational’ sexual offender who is generally non-criminal and begins offending late in life. He is unlikely to create a situation, but sexual offending develops following emotional attachment or congruence with a child; this type offends against people he feels close to, within his environment.

It is, therefore, imperative that practitioners responsible for the management and monitoring of such clients are alert to the risks of such environmental factors. Indeed, practitioners must be qualified, experienced, and well supported when managing people convicted of sexual offending (*Position Statement for the Assessment, Management and Treatment of Sex Offenders*, Ministry of Justice, 2010). It is essential, before any

reintegration intervention is utilized, that practitioners first assess the risk and needs of those convicted of sexual offending, by using specialized, systematic and comprehensive risk management tools (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). By experienced and trained practitioners, using specialist risk assessment tools, they are able to make robust and defensible risk assessments, and design reintegration plans that address known factors linked to offending behavior, such as having poor social networks (Cortoni, 2009), an unstable lifestyle (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004), or specific sexual risk factors such as a sexual arousal to children (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). Using empirically based risk management tools (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), practitioners can design meaningful reintegration strategies.

It should also be noted that professionals supporting those convicted of sexual offending to reintegrate back into the community, must also be aware of the capabilities of their clients. As part of the robust assessment of a persons' risk, practitioners must give equal attention to the needs of the client. While public protection concerns are rightly a high priority, practitioners can become preoccupied by this. As a consequence, they fail to address the specific and often unique needs of the client (Connelly & Williamson, 2000). This presents a particular ethical concern, as reintegrating people back into the community who are ill prepared or de-skilled for the process has the potential to cause further harm. Not only might the person being reintegrated be harmed in the process, but people who commit crime often do so because they lack the internal and external resources to function in society and achieve meaningful life goals (Ward & Stewart, 2003); therefore, it places others at risk too. To help mitigate this, practitioners should embed, into rehabilitation strategies, support to help overcome social deficits or social problems (Ward & Laws, 2010) and help build a sense of agency and hope using the involvement of significant others to support the process (McNeill, 2009).

However, not all individuals convicted of sexual offending might be appropriately targeted to return to a religious or spiritual community. In particular, those where the faith environment was directly linked to their offending, might be an unsuitable candidate for such a reintegration strategy. For example, as Smallbone et al. (2013) note, situational offenders include professionals who sexually abuse, such as priests or church leaders. It is, therefore, timely that we bring to attention the literature on professionals who sexually abuse.

### **5.1. Professional sexual offenders**

Professionals who sexually offend are individuals who exploit their employment status to access and abuse children. These include professionals such as teachers, foster carers, youth workers, and pertinent to this review, religious leaders (Sullivan & Beech, 2002, 2004). This subgroup of sexual perpetrators is somewhat distinct from the needs of the population of offenders this review aims to assist. That is, we aim to explore how being involved in a religious or spiritual community can assist in the rehabilitation process, rather than examining links between faith and the onset of crime. Even though we excluded this group from our current systematic review, contemporary literature on professionals who sexually offend within faith communities is buoyant (see Sullivan & Beech, 2002 and Terry, 2008 for reviews) and, therefore, an important domain deserving a brief discussion here.

The media, in particular, have played a significant role in providing scandalous accounts of incidences of abuse across religious denominations (Jenkins, 2001). Even though such abuse is carried out by only a small subset of the general sexual offending population, the offenses commissioned by those in religious authority have come into greater focus. A flurry of academic responses is noted, attempting to profile perpetrators, understand the prevalence of abuse and profile their victims. Likewise, efforts to determine effective strategies to assess, manage, treat, and prevent offenses occurring in the future, have also been observed. Much of the current knowledge is based on the findings of the “Nature and

Scope” (John Jay College, 2004) study commissioned by the Catholic Church in the United States. However, while the literature is relatively comprehensive, it remains inconclusive and offers some contradictions as to whether this subgroup is distinct or not from the general sexual offending population.

On the one hand, when compared to the general sexual offending population, the demographic profile of religious professionals who sexually abuse is different. They tend to have had better educational experiences, be slightly older, single, use some levels of force in their offending, and lack any criminal history (Langevin, Curnoe, & Bain, 2000). Their victim profile is also quite distinct; they tend to target young boys and use their professional status in the church to both access children and gain their trust (Firestone, Moulden, & Wexler, 2009). They report that their sexually deviant interest in children became part of their motivation to work in their chosen profession (Kotze, 2013; Sullivan & Beech, 2004). Indeed, because of their offending prevalence, recidivism, and age, this group is more comparative to white-collar criminals rather than the general sexual offending population (Piquero, Piquero, Terry, Youstin, & Nobles, 2008).

However, other studies suggest the profile of religious professionals who sexually abuse is, in fact, similar in many ways to the general sexual offending population. They are comparative in terms of the risk factors found to be associated with repeat offending, such as having all male victims and engaging in sexual offending at a young age (Perillo, Mercado, & Terry, 2008). Like general sexual offending populations, the number of offenses and victims tend to be in single figures, and those committing multiple and enduring offenses remain in the minority (Mercado, Tallon, & Terry, 2008). Religious professionals who sexually abuse tend to be known to the victim, do not network with other offenders, are not prolific users of child abuse imagery, and are not deviantly fixated or attracted to children (Terry & Ackerman, 2008). Finally, they also tend to abuse as a result of situational opportunity (Holt

& Massey, 2013). Thus, religious professionals who sexually abuse may not be as distinct from the general sexual offending population as perhaps first thought. In terms of assessment and treatment, they are likely not to require different approaches. However, when reintegrating religious professionals who sexually abuse back into the community, alternatives to a faith environment may be required.

## 6. Conclusions

Someone seeking potential victims to sexually abuse can utilize a faith environment, like any community where children and vulnerable adults co-exist, inappropriately. While the majority of those convicted of sexual offending do not go on to commit further sexual offenses, a small percentage do (Farmer & Mann, 2010). Therefore, before any rehabilitation strategy is designed and implemented, experienced, trained practitioners should carry out a robust and empirically tested risk assessment. Such assessment will help determine the likelihood of possible recidivism, the motivations of the client, and their individual needs. Without such systematic assessment and appreciation of clients' risks, needs, and motivations, people may well misuse religious text, distort its religious meanings, and compromise the goodwill and care of a faith community, to become a place to groom victims and ultimately re-offend.

We used positive criminological theories and a systematic review of the faith literature to support our rationale that religious and spiritual communities appear to be at least one option to assist the journey of desistance in general offending populations. Indeed, there are also many non-religious groups and communities who appear to provide just as valuable an environment as those with a religious ideology. However, because of the limited understanding of how religious and spiritual communities might help those convicted of sexual offending to desist, for the purpose of this review, we concentrated on these groups. We have argued that a faith community is likely to act as a complementary environment to

the specific needs of those convicted of sexual offending when re-entering back into the community. We note that such a community can provide the initial inspiration to change, offer pro-social adult networks, guide those convicted of sexual offending to new ways of thinking about themselves and others around them, and provide hope for a positive future.

The ideas presented in this review aim to stimulate thought, debate, and future research ideas. In light of the large gap in the literature, much more research is needed to understand the effects of faith communities on sexual offending populations. While the ultimate goal of rehabilitation is for people to be reintegrated back into the community and no longer offend, understanding how they achieve this is of significant value too. Future studies which examine the experiences of the re-entry process of those convicted of sexual offending as well as the meaning they place on faith communities during this process, would be of value.

This review also aims to assist policy and practice. Further work is needed to develop inclusive policies and practice that help and support non-criminal justice organizations, such as religious and spiritual communities, in their commitment with rehabilitating offenders. As the criminal-justice system relies more on the faith and voluntary sector to carry out its work, policy must lead and guide organizations to collaborate and support each other while the responsibility for the rehabilitation of those convicted of sexual offending is shared.



**Appendix A**

## Criterion for Systematic Review

- 
- Only empirical studies examining a relationship between religion/faith and offender/crime were included
  - Studies examining sexual offenses committed by clergy or professionals within the church were excluded
  - Studies which examined outcomes for communities or faith based organizations were excluded
  - Young offender studies (<18) were excluded
  - Only published peer reviewed papers were included (books, literature reviews, thesis' etc. were excluded)
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Table 1.  
Summary of Papers Identified for Review

Study	Population Setting	N	Offense Type	Religious Variables	Other variables	Findings*
Adorjan and Chui (2012)	Community	23	Various including sexual	Religious belief	Social bonds and social capital	B
Allen, Phillips, Roff, Cavanaugh, and Day (2008)	Prison	73	Murder and Sexual	Religiousness and spirituality, daily spiritual experiences	Anxiety depression and desire for hastened death	M
Armour, Windsor, Aguilar and Taub (2008)	Prison	102	Various but sexual offending not specified	Daily spiritual experiences	Empathy, propensity to forgive, forgiveness	B
Bakken, Gunter and Visser (2014)	Prison to Community	920	None Specified	Spirituality and religious affiliation	Substance use family attachment, deviant peers, neighborhood characteristics and employment status	B
Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken and Dammer (2000)	Prison	70	None Specified	Meaning of religion		B
Daggett, Camp, Kwon, Rosenmerkel and Klein-Saffran (2008)	Prison	794	None Specified	Service attendance and religious salience	Motivation for change, feelings of self-worth, and community awareness	B
Duwe and King (Duwe & King, 2013)	Prison to Community	732	Various including sexual	Innerchange program	Recidivism	B
Eshuys and Smallbone (2006)	Prison	111	Sexual	Religious affiliation: atheists, dropouts, converts, and stayers, religious behavior, experience	Sexual offending	H
Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder and Seffrin (2008)	Community	41	None Specified	Spirituality and religious participation	Self-reported crime, problem drug and alcohol use	B
Jensen and Gibbons (2002)	Community	20	Various including sexual	Religiosity	Shame and new crime or parole violation	B

Johnson (2004)	Prison to Community	201	None Specified	Faith programme participation	Recidivism	NA
Kerley and Copes (2009)	Prison	63	Serious crimes (unclear if any sexual)	Saliency of religion, family experiences, impact of religion in present context of prison	Attitudes and behaviors and ability to cope	B
Kerley, Copes, Tewksbury and Dabney (2011)	Prison	208	None Specified	Religious behaviors inc. prayer, watching religious broadcast on TV and attending religious class or group	Deviant behavior including; destruction of prison property, fighting, carry weapon, spend time on disciplinary unit and self-control	B
Kerley, Matthews and Blanchard (2005a)	Prison	386	None Specified	Religious belief, Religious behavior (attendance service, group etc.)	Arguing with other inmates, fighting with other inmates	B
Kerley, Matthews and Schulz (Kerley et al., 2005b)	Prison	268	None Specified	Completing OSL faith based event	Negative emotions and poor behavior in prison	B
Maruna, Wilson and Curran (2006)	Prison	75	Various including sexual	Conversion	Shame management and coping strategy	B
Mela, Marcoux, Baetz, Griffin, Angelski and Deqiang (2008)	Forensic Unit	183	Substance misuse history no sexual offending specified	Religious activities, beliefs and spirituality	Depression, anxiety, satisfaction with life	B
O'Connor and Perreyclear (2002)	Prison	779	Various including sexual	Attendance of religious programmes	Infraction of prison rules (includes fighting being in restricted area having contraband, escaping)	B
Pezzella and Vlahos (2014)	Community	136	None Specified	Religious saliency and practice	Health measures (e.g. Weight, physical activity, drug and alcohol use, extramarital and unprotected sex practice)	M

Schroeder and Frana (2009)	Community	11	Various no sexual offending specified	Religion and spirituality meaning	Emotional coping and desistance	B
Topalli, Brezina and Bernhardt (2013)	Community	48	Various no sexual offending specified	Religious belief	Decisions to engage in crime	H

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\*B= Beneficial Association, H= Harmful Association M= Mixed NA= No Association

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**Highlights**

- Although, there is support that religion and spirituality acts as a preventer to crime, studies tend to exclude those convicted of sexual abuse
- Studies which examine how those convicted of sexual offending, enter into, and maintain, a process of desistance are scarce
- A number of parallels between the factors needed to promote the desistance from sexual offending and the conditions encountered when engaged with a religious or spiritual community, are outlined
- The potential for people to use faith-based communities to facilitate offending, are also discussed